



CRS Report for Congress

Iraqi Civilian Deaths Estimates

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Summary

This report presents various governmental and non-governmental estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths. The Department of Defense (DOD) regularly updates total U.S. military deaths statistics from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), as reflected in CRS Report RS21578, *Iraq: U.S. Casualties*. However, no Iraqi or U.S. government office regularly releases publically available statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths. Statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths are sometimes available through alternative sources, such as nonprofit organizations, or through statements made by officials to the press. Because these estimates are based on varying time periods and have been created using differing methodologies, readers should exercise caution when using these statistics and should look on them as guideposts rather than as statements of fact. See also CRS Report RS22532, *Iraqi Police and Security Forces Deaths Estimates*. This report will be updated as needed.

Government Estimates of Iraqi Civilian Deaths

The Department of Defense (DOD) has not released a composite estimate of Iraqi civilian deaths during Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, in the report *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, it has released a chart containing two separate estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths from January 2006 to May 2008.¹ The first estimate is derived from a compilation of coalition and Iraqi reports of civilian deaths while the second estimate is derived from the Iraq Significant Activities (SIGACTS) III database, which includes coalition reports only. The DOD noted in the December 2007 update of *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq* that “host nation reports capture some types of deaths on

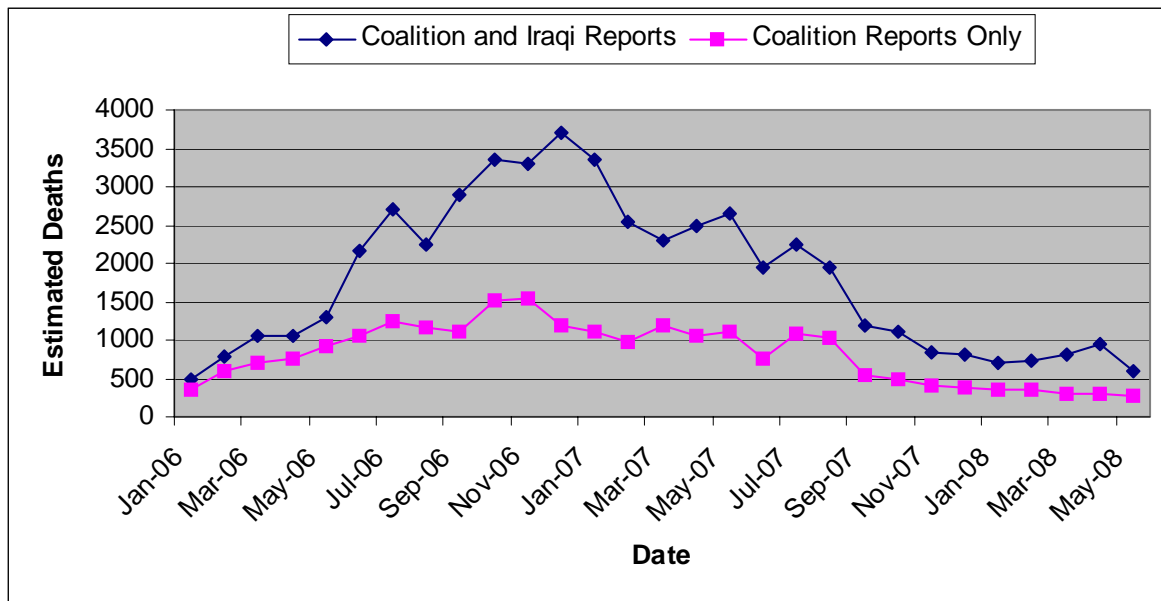
¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Multi-National Corps-Iraq, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: June 2008 Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2007 (Section 9010)*, June 2008, p. 21, at [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master_16_June_08_%20FINAL_SIGNED%20.pdf].

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 27 AUG 2008		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Iraqi Civilian Deaths Estimates				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave, SE, Washington, DC, 20540-7500				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 5	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

which the Coalition does not have visibility, in particular, murders and deaths in locations where Coalition forces are not present.”²

While the chart provides a guideline to Iraqi civilian deaths trends, the specific data used to create the chart have not been released. Using the DOD chart as a guideline, therefore, CRS has reproduced an approximation of the original chart in the figure below.

Figure 1. Estimated Iraqi Civilian Deaths, January 2006 to May 2008



Source: CRS rendition of DOD graph, as derived from *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master_16_June_08_%20FINAL_SIGNED%20.pdf]. Multi-National Corps - Iraq Strategic Plans Assessments Iraq Significant Activities (SIGACTS) III database (Coalition Reports Only) and (Coalition and Iraqi Reports) as of May 2008.

For some time, the United Nations attempted to release comprehensive statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths. From August 2005 to March 2007, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) published a series of quarterly reports on human rights in Iraq that included sections on Iraqi civilian casualties. On April 25, 2007, however, the Iraqi government announced its intention to cease providing civilian casualty figures to the United Nations.³ Ivana Vuco, a UN human rights officer, stated, “[Iraqi] government officials had made clear during discussions that they believed releasing high casualty numbers would make it more difficult to quell unrest.”⁴ The most recent UNAMI report on human rights, released on October 11, 2007, and concerning the period between April -

² U.S. Department of Defense, Multi-National Corps-Iraq, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: December 2007 Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2007 (Section 9010)*, December 2007, p. 18, at [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/FINAL-SecDef%20Signed-20071214.pdf].

³ Tina Susman, “Iraq won’t give casualty figures to U.N.,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 2007, p.12.

⁴ Ibid.

June 2007, expressed regret that “for this reporting period, [UNAMI] was again unable to persuade the Government of Iraq to release data on casualties compiled by the Ministry of Health and its other institutions. UNAMI continues to maintain that making such data public is in the public interest.”⁵ No further reports concerning Iraqi civilian casualties have been published by UNAMI.

In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, the chief U.S. military spokesman, said Iraqi ministry civilian death tolls estimates have risen from a low of 568 in December 2007 and 541 in January 2008 to roughly 721 in February 2008 and 1,082 in March 2008.⁶ “There was somewhere on the order of a 25 or 30 percent increase in the number of civilian casualties when you consider March compared to February,” Smith said, although “the numbers are still nowhere near what they had been last summer.”⁷ The *New York Times* reports that the Iraqi Health Ministry lists a total of 865 civilian deaths for July 2008 and 975 deaths for June 2008.⁸

Other Estimates of Iraqi Civilian Deaths

Table 1. Other Iraqi Civilian Deaths Estimates

Iraq Body Count March 19, 2003 - August 22, 2008	86,661 - 94,558
Iraq Coalition Casualty Count April 28, 2005 - August 22, 2008	43,099
Brookings Iraq Index May 2003 - August 14, 2008	113,616
The Associated Press April 2005 - February 13, 2008	34,832 dead 40,174 wounded
The Iraq Family Health Study (the “WHO study”) March 2003 - June 2006	151,000
<i>The Lancet</i> , “Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq” March 19, 2003 - July 31, 2006	426,369 - 793,663

Source: Prepared by CRS with data from noted sources.

Three cluster studies of violence-related mortality in Iraq have recently been undertaken. The first two studies were both conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Baghdad’s Al-Mustansiriya University and are commonly referred to in

⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq, *Human Rights Report, 1 April - 20 June 2007*, at <http://www.uniraq.org/FileLib/misc/HR%20Report%20Apr%20Jun%202007%20EN.pdf>.

⁶ Farah Stockman and Bryan Bender, “Iraq violence up as troop levels drop; Value of the surge debated,” *The Boston Globe*, April 7, 2008, p. A1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sabrina Tavernise, “Wartime low for U.S. soldier deaths in July,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2008.

the press as “the *Lancet* studies” because they were published in the British medical journal of that name. The third study was conducted by a consortium of researchers, many of whom are associated with the World Health Organization, and so the study is commonly referred to as “the WHO study” in the press.

The first of these studies, published in 2004, used a cluster sample survey of households in Iraq to develop an estimate ranging from 8,000 to 194,000 civilian casualties due to violent deaths since the start of the war.⁹ This report has come under some criticism for its methodology, which may not have accounted for the long-term negative health effects of the Saddam Hussein era. Former British Foreign Minister Jack Straw has written a formal Ministerial Response rejecting the findings of the first *Lancet* report on the grounds that the data analyzed were inaccurate.¹⁰

The second study, published in 2006, increased the number of clusters surveyed from 33 to 47 and reported an estimate of between 426,369 and 793,663 Iraqi civilian deaths from violent causes since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹¹ This article, too, has sparked some controversy.¹² Stephen Moore, a consultant for Gorton Moore International, objected to the methods used by the researchers, commenting in the *Wall Street Journal* that the *Lancet* article lacked some of the hallmarks of good research: a small margin of error, a record of the demographics of respondents (so that one can be sure one has captured a fair representation of an entire population), and a large number of cluster points.¹³ On the other hand, documents written by the UK Ministry of Defence’s chief scientific advisor have come to light, which called the survey’s methods “close to best practice” and “robust.”¹⁴

In the third and most recent study, a team of investigators from the Federal Ministry of Health in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Ministry of Planning, the Kurdistan Ministry of Health, the Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology in Baghdad, and the World Health Organization formed the Iraq Family Health Survey (IFHS) Study Group to research violence-related mortality in Iraq.¹⁵ In their nationally representative cluster study, interviewers visited 89.4% of 1,086 household clusters; the household

⁹ Les Roberts, Ridyah Lafta, Richard Garfield et al., “Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet*, October 29, 2004, 364 (9448), pp. 1857-1864.

¹⁰ Jack Straw, Written U.K. Ministerial Statement Responding to a Lancet Study on Iraqi Casualty Numbers, November 16, 2004, at [<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/newsroom/latest-news/?view=News&id=1541252>].

¹¹ Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy et al., “Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet*, October 21, 2006, 368 (9545), pp. 1421-1429.

¹² Sabrina Tavernise and Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “Iraqi Dead May Total 600,000, Study Says,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2006, p. A16.

¹³ Steven E. Moore, “655,000 War Dead?,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 18, 2006, p. A20.

¹⁴ *Newsday*, “High Death Toll Backed,” March 27, 2007, p. A25.

¹⁵ Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group, “Violence-Related Mortality in Iraq from 2002 to 2006,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, January 31, 2008, pp. 484-492.

response rate was 96.2%. They concluded that there had been an estimated 151,000 violence-related deaths from March 2003 through June 2006 and that violence was the main cause of death for men between the ages of 15 and 59 years during the first three years after the 2003 invasion. This study seems to be widely cited for violence-related mortality rates in Iraq. Neither the *Lancet* studies nor the IFHS study make an effort to distinguish different victims of violence, such as civilians versus police or security force members.

The Associated Press has kept a database of Iraqi civilian and security forces dead and wounded since April 2005. According to their database, between April 2005 and August 10, 2008, 34,832 Iraqi civilians have died and 40,174 have been wounded.¹⁶

A number of nonprofit groups have released unofficial estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths. The Iraq Body Count (IBC) is one source often cited by the media; it bases its online casualty estimates on media reports of casualties, some of which may involve security forces as well as civilians. As of August 22, 2008, the IBC estimated that between 86,661 and 94,558 civilians had died as a result of military action.¹⁷ The IBC documents each of the casualties it records with a media source and provides a minimum and a maximum estimate.

The Brookings Institution has used modified numbers from the UN *Human Rights Report*, the Iraq Body Count, General Petraeus's congressional testimony given on September 10-11, 2007, and other sources to develop its own composite estimate for Iraqi civilians who have died by violence. By combining all of these sources by date, the Brookings Institution estimates that between May 2003 and August 22, 2008, 113,616 Iraqi civilians have died.¹⁸

Finally, the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count (ICCC) is another well-known nonprofit group that tracks Iraqi civilian and Iraqi security forces deaths using an IBC-like method of posting media reports of deaths. ICCC, like IBC, is prone to the kind of errors likely when using media reports for data: some deaths may not be reported in the media, while other deaths may be reported more than once. The ICCC does have one rare feature: it separates police and soldier deaths from civilian deaths. The ICCC estimates that there were 43,099 civilian deaths from April 28, 2005 through August 22, 2008.¹⁹

¹⁶ CRS discussion with Associated Press, August 10, 2008.

¹⁷ Iraq Body Count at [<http://www.iraqbodycount.net>]. IBC is a nongovernmental organization managed by researchers and volunteers.

¹⁸ Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index: Tracking Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, August 14, 2008, p. 5, at [<http://www.brookings.edu/saban/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf>].

¹⁹ Iraq Coalition Casualty Count at [<http://icasualties.org/oif/IraqiDeaths.aspx>]. ICCC is a nongovernmental organization managed by researchers and volunteers.